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NOAH MAMET: "I Try to Reinvent Diplomacy for Today's World."

The atypical U.S. Ambassador immersed himself in the local cultural and social life of Buenos Aires, where he opens the doors of this residence to art exhibitions, asados as well as informal soccer games.

By Loreley Gaffoglio

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It is raining heavily and except for the Federal Police agent standing outside on Libertador Avenue and wearing a blue plastic cape, everything indicates that inside the Bosch Palace, residence of the United States Ambassador Noah Mamet, a "revolution" of style and ways managed to replace the diplomatic status quo: his Harley Davidson, used to tour the Seven Lakes in January lies at the entrance of the Palace covered by a tarp. Inside the Palace, there are other curiosities that range from an organic garden built by Mamet to have fruits and vegetables free from pesticides to a brand- new pool table surrounded by stunning chandeliers and gilded columns. On top of a Louis XVI table, a handful of photos show the private life of this Californian aged 47, political and financial advisor, and fund raiser for the last campaign of President Barack Obama. In January 2015, Mamet received his credentials as U.S. Ambassador to Argentina after overcoming fierce opposition from the Republicans in the U.S. Senate, on the grounds of his total lack of knowledge of the country and its language. Now, Mamet's photos show him smiling accompanied by Mick Jagger as well as by children from the NGO "La Unión de los Pibes" –frequently invited by the Ambassador to play soccer at the magnificent residence gardens designed by Thays.

It is enough to know the contrasts related to the openness of this Palace to understand that what is at stake goes beyond an updated and ground-breaking vision of bilateral relations: in a very short time, Mamet managed not only to immerse himself into the Buenos Aires City social fabric but he also contributed to rebuilding the links between the two countries. He is seen with Argentine friends at the Teatro Colon, art exhibition previews, and trendy restaurants in the neighborhood of Palermo. He is also responsible for the idea of organizing mixed trips to the United States to bring together the two parties interested in investments. An eloquent attitude shows his dedication to building relations beyond sectors. In one of the living rooms of his residence, framed as a bulwark or as sign of identification, a T-shirt of Boca Juniors stands at a preeminent place where he receives his visitors. But when the frame is turned around, the front also shows River's colors. The deal lies in his connections. He is both friends with D'Onofrio as well as Angelici. "I know that rivalry well, but I want everybody here to feel comfortable," says the Ambassador. The Ambassador is an accomplished tennis player and golfer, an extremely friendly person, and he also has a passion for soccer. Faithful to his style, he will not reveal what team he is fan of but he praises the new course of the country. "I love Argentina and its people," he says in Spanish. And that phrase will be repeated like a mantra.

You are an atypical diplomat: you use Twitter, post updates about your travels and meetings, places you visit and people you meet. Is it a new way of practicing diplomacy?

Yes. I'm trying to reinvent diplomacy for today's interconnected world. When I arrived here, my goal was to increase connectivity at all levels, identify all areas of common interest where we could cooperate. I focused on four rather uncontroversial but important areas: science, technology, energy and educational exchanges. Now there are many more. But for me, it is not only important to concentrate myself on the levels of foreign relations but also to get involved with the community.



Photo: Martín Lucesole

Can you expand on that?

We want to use this residence to strengthen ties on a wide range of levels. Here, I invite people to an asado. I also invite children's organizations to participate in tennis and soccer classes. We are sitting here in the music room that was originally designed for concerts, and actually the last time a concert was played here was many years ago. "It is necessary to make a new start," he said. Now we host wine tastings, and the quincho where we have our asados had never before been such a busy place. "Pilo" Bordón, current Ambassador to Chile and former Ambassador to the United States, was thrilled last year when he was invited to our first asado. "I have been a guest at the Bosch Palace for 30 years but this is the first time I have been invited to an asado here." I learnt from that, and I decided to organize many more asados. I bought a pool table because I realized that in such a formal dining room, relationships cannot be built fluently. So I receive people from all sectors on a permanent basis. Business deals have been reached between people who met here. I teased them and told them they had to pay a ten percent commission to my Government. But the answer was they already did by paying taxes.

Is it a "revolution" in form and substance?

Yes. It is important to build bridges as soon as possible. And that is achieved through people-to-people relations. People-to-people connections are vital. The more links there are between people, the better our

countries will work together. Look at the “good chemistry” between President Macri and President Obama, and between the First Ladies.

Is your Californian origin responsible for your bold style of doing things?

In part, yes. California and seaside cities are less formal and friendly than others. When I first came to Washington I had no overcoat, and only one suit. It is important to adjust to the places you visit, and Buenos Aires felt a natural place to work because people are extroverted. I love this country and I enjoy this country a lot. Tourism needs to be increased. I often make the joke that I help the local economy by inviting friends and family. Sometimes I feel like a hotel manager because many people stay here. For the first time in 99 years, we illuminated the front of the residence, one of the most beautiful buildings that used to be always dark at night. We want to show a new presence.

You witnessed two very distinct stages in the country: the last eleven months of Cristina Kirchner’s administration and Macri’s era. What is Washington’s opinion of the Kirchners?

When I arrived in the country, I was surprised by the scarce communication there was. Except for two trips, to Orlando and Europe, the Kirchners had not traveled much. Maybe they needed to learn more about the United States, and not be guided by stereotypes. A more fluid interaction between people and States always results in better relationships. But neither I nor any other Ambassador was received by Cristina Kirchner, which is unusual. There was progress in four areas: science, technology, energy and educational exchanges, although we would have wished to move forward with a more comprehensive agenda like the current one.

Is it usual for an American President to give such a strong support to an incoming administration as it occurred with Obama’s visit?

No, it is not. But it was not only the United States. Europe and many countries were excited with the fact that Argentina reintegrated into the world, and offered their support. The United States wants and needs Argentina to be successful. It is fundamental to focus on major global issues such as terrorism, drug trafficking, climate change, financial stability and human rights. We need strong democracies and the third largest economy in the region to be solid. We will do everything we can to support Argentina.



Photo: Martín Lucesole

Did you play a key role for that visit take place?

I knew President Obama wanted to visit Cuba after seven decades of embargo, and also that that moment was ideal for him to come here and celebrate the new course of the country after 19 years without bilateral visits. I said that if President Obama came to Argentina, he should do it sooner **rather** than later as a clear sign of approval to Argentina's reintegration into the world. And the changes taking place at the beginning of Macri's administration coupled with the conformation of his cabinet composed of talented and honest people were a clear sign of the new course the world now celebrates.

Bilateral relations had its ups and downs: they were "carnal" during Menem's era, cold and hostile at times, with the Kirchners. How would you describe them now?

I would say mature and positive. I do not want to look back. We must look forward, as Foreign Minister Malcorra said, we will certainly have disagreements like all countries, even as it happens among friends, but we expect to have an open and collaborative dialogue, where all issues can be addressed.

The resonant corruption cases being revealed must keep you busy sending multiple cables to the State Department. Is Washington surprised by the level of corruption?

It shows the importance of government transparency, and we believe this is the direction that this administration has taken. But, yes, some things are surprising. Unfortunately, corruption is a global issue. Look at Brazil. I think Argentines feel that these things only happen to them. The more inserted into the world a country is, the more it realizes that it shares the same challenges with many others. That is why we need Argentina to be successful and work with us in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, corruption and climate change.

Do the current developments require from you a more detailed type of communication due to the extremely high levels of corruption known so far?

Let me say again: it is a global issue. I talk to Washington every day; I even did so today in relation to the visit of Secretary of State John Kerry to build on the agreements signed during President Obama's visit, and to continue to open channels of communication, since bilateral relations for years were not as robust and positive as we would have liked them to be. Security and drug trafficking are now a priority. We are making progress so that U.S. and Colombian special forces can train local security forces to strengthen controls against drug trafficking at the border with Bolivia. We have shown our fusion center in California to Security Ministry representatives so that they can replicate the model. There, various agencies exchange information and work together at the same place to strengthen security after September 11.

Does Washington have a stance on Anibal Fernandez's role in the trafficking of ephedrine and his alleged ties to Mexican cartels?

I cannot comment on an ongoing investigation. I will only say that our cooperation is very good in security matters in general. And not only with the national government; also with provincial governments, irrespective of their political color.



Photo: Martín Lucesole

Will the DEA request the extradition of Ibar Pérez Corradi?

There are no plans to do so for the time being.

What is Washington's opinion about the death of Alberto Nisman?

I will underscore what I said the day that awful tragedy occurred, three days after I arrived here: We wish Justice to be done and the case to be resolved with the most transparency possible. When we learned about the events, we offered all kinds of technical assistance in criminology and laboratory tests. But there was no reply.

President Obama announced the declassification of documents from the dictatorship period. Do you think they could provide specific information on the number of missing people?

To be honest, I do not know. The intention is to help and declassify as many documents as possible. Documents are being read on a one- by- one basis to see what can be delivered.

Will the United States provide economic help for Argentina to host Syrian refugees?

The UN, several NGOs and the United States are working together to help countries with that commitment. The issue of refugees is essential not only for the United States but also for the international community. Canada will host 25,000 and a large number will be hosted by Norway and Sweden. We are in the process of looking into such assistance that is financial as well as logistic, in the form of language classes, jobs, housing. The issue has many components and the coalition is striving to relocate people and create the conditions necessary to solve the problems.

How would you describe your relationship with President Macri?

Professional, warm and friendly. I met him the first week I arrived in Buenos Aires, and at the same time I also met with Scioli and Massa. It was very important for the embassy to have good relations with every candidate and with the different parties, since it was unknown who would be the next President. Our job is to build bridges and we have good relations with the different political leaders. In my case, when Macri took over, we began to further strengthen the relationship.

Have you been invited to Los Abrojos Quinta?

Yes, a few times for meetings and I also went to Olivos (President Macri's residence). I played paddle at his residence before he underwent knee surgery. He won, of course. It would be a bad idea to beat the President [laughs]. The truth is that he is very good and very competitive. It was fun, although I fell and my knee started bleeding. Juliana who was there, assisted me. The last thing I wanted to do was to stain the President's court with blood. But I play tennis a lot. I played with Ricardo Darin, Leonardo Mayer, and I invited Del Potro. Tennis at this residence is another good way of connecting with people.

How did your friendship with Obama start?

Ironically, I was very close to the Clintons. In the 2008 campaign I worked for Hillary, who lost the primaries against the then-Senator Obama. He struck me as a very nice person from the very moment I met him. And when he became president I helped him to increase tourism in the United States. We created the Travel USA government office. Also, I subsequently worked very close to him during his reelection campaign. Then he asked me to be the U.S. Ambassador to Argentina. At first, I hesitated because I very much liked my life in California and doing politics while running my own consulting firm in San Francisco and L.A. But it was a unique opportunity, and in life, windows open and close. So I decided to accept not only to represent my country but also to work for a President I admire, respect and consider a friend.



Photo: Martín Lucesole

Close?

Presidents often have closest friends from their past. Then you have the people with whom they develop “good chemistry” and they work with. That would be my case. When I was trying to convince him to come to Argentina, I told him: “If you come with your family, you must go to Bariloche. It is one of the most beautiful places in the world.” I had recently returned from a motorcycle tour around the Seven Lakes and was amazed by the beauty of the place. He followed my advice and now, he wants to return.

If Hillary is elected, do you think you will be confirmed as Ambassador?

I do not know. I believe there is strong support for me to stay here but that depends on who becomes the next President. If the President asks me to do so, I would say yes because I love Argentina and I believe we are doing good things for both countries.

What is the difference between Obama’s and Hillary’s leadership styles?

The two of them are very intelligent. Unlike Obama when he was elected, she knows Washington better than anyone because she was Senator, Secretary of State and First Lady for eight years. Probably, she knows the President’s work better than anybody running for the Presidency before. Both have different strengths. But there is a campaign going on and I would rather not get into details because as the U.S. Ambassador I represent the whole country and not a party.

What would you say is the reason for the high level of unpopularity she has among the voters?

The reason is that they do not know her. I do and I can assure you that she is not only very smart but also a very nice person. When it comes to politicians or celebrities, many people believe they know them based on the stereotypes generated by a public profile. Hillary has many great qualities.

Apart from ISIS, WikiLeaks is now the great enemy of the United States and, in particular, of the Democrats?

I will not comment on that.

How do you imagine the United States governed by Trump?

I do not know and frankly, I do not think it is very clear to him either.

Which are your diplomatic successes?

We were the first ones to bring a delegation of thirty Argentines, including government members and representatives from the private sector, to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Silicon Valley with a focus on technology, innovation and renewable energy. The delegation visited 35 companies, including the Tesla electric car plant; a virtual reality start-up in Venice; the Port of Los Angeles to see the efficiency with which cargo is moved there; the Stanford Research Institute; business incubator Singularity University, and all the work conducted by UCLA in terms of sustainability. It was a great success: the private sector had never traveled to the United States together with government officials.

In the ranking of possible U.S. investments, which sector is more attractive?

The renewable energy sector. In Los Angeles, half of the energy to be consumed in the next three years will come from wind and solar sources. Here, renewable energy accounts for less than one percent, [but this should improve with Argentina's] great wind in the South and great sun in the North, and highly interested investors. In fact, the Undersecretary for Renewable Energy, Sebastian Kind, participated in that trip. And our experts traveled four times to Argentina to provide advice in relation to a smart energy grid.

You must have been the first U.S. Ambassador ever to tour the South on a Harley Davidson.

Correct?

You are right. And I did so because of what we've been talking about: to find ways to connect with the community. Along with my Argentine friends, we named our group "meat riders" instead of "easy riders", because across the 1,500 kilometers we toured, we always stopped to have an asado. But I also visited a dozen provinces. I was very impressed by Suri's Cave in Cafayate, and want to organize a concert there broadcasted by local and U.S. television. Another idea is to bring the classic soccer match River-Boca to Miami. And we will continue to showcase Argentine art at the residence. Minujin's art was exhibited first and now we are hosting Pablo Reynoso's artwork. Believe it or not, that had never been done before.

How was your meeting with Mick Jagger here?

Something fantastic and surreal too. It is Mick Jagger! He loves architecture, so I showed him all the rooms and told him the story of the residence. When we were at the quincho drinking a beer, Mick said: "Noah, I'll tell you a secret: For the first time after 50 years, we will give a show in Cuba on March 21." As I already knew at that moment that President Obama was going to be there at the same time, although we had not made the announcement, I told him: "Mick, now it is me who will tell you a secret: For the first time after 70 years, a U.S. President will visit Cuba on that same day. Honestly, I do not think the island is big enough for the two of you."

1969

Born on April 8 to a Jewish family in Manhattan Beach, California.

1992

He graduated from UCLA with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and International Relations, and he worked in Santa Barbara for Bill Clinton's Presidential Campaign.

From 1996 to 2003

He served as Advisor for the House Democratic Leader, Congressman Dick Gephardt.

2004

He founded the political and business consulting firm Noah Mamet & Associates LLC

2007

He was a member of an international delegation that monitored the elections in Sierra Leone

2008

He collaborated in the campaign for the Democratic nomination of Hillary Clinton that won Obama, and four years later he was one of the most important fund raisers for the presidential reelection

2015

He received his credentials as U.S. Ambassador to Argentina

The Future

In January, President Barack Obama will leave the White House. If Hillary Clinton takes over the Presidency, Mamet has chances to remain in Argentina considering the important progress made in the relation between Argentina and the United States